

THE NEW BABYLON

Proposal for researching and scripting a one-hour film

St. Petersburg was named after the patron saint of its founder, czar Peter Romanov, the Great. He built it in the first two decades of the 18th century as the capital of a new imperial autocracy, free of the feudal landed aristocracy and the orthodox church patriarchy that had dominated court life in Moscow. Built at the entrance of the Neva river into the Baltic sea, it was Peter's "Window to the West". It was to open up Russia to European commerce, manners and art, and was to be the home base of a new imperial navy. Designed by Italian architects, it was administered by "enlightened" German barons from the newly conquered Baltic states, and financed by taxes on old-fashioned "Muscovy" beards and clothes. The language at Court was French.

St. Petersburg was detested not only by the old nobility, but also by their peasant serfs, who made up 90% of Russia's population. They had been forced to provide the labour for filling the Neva marshes with dirt, dredging the harbour, and installing timbered quays to contain spring floods. 100,000 of them lost their lives doing this work. Serfs were also conscripted into Peter's enlarged army and navy for his expansionist wars with Sweden and Turkey. Resistance to the new city and the oppressive regime it represented was led by orthodox priests throughout the country. They called it "the capital of materialism", "the abode of the Anti-Christ", "the New Babylon".

St. Petersburg has been the centre of the endless conflict between Russian "westerners" and "slavophiles" ever since. Within a century after Peter's death, the old nobles and patriarchs had re-aligned themselves with the Romanov dynasty and moved to the new capital, while the threat from the west took the form first of republicanism, then industrialisation, and then socialism. The conflict inspired some of the best writing of the nineteenth century by St. Petersburg natives Gogol and Dostoyevsky, who favoured the slavophiles, and Ivan Turgenev, who favoured the westerners. And its echoes could be heard in the music of St. Petersburg composers Glinka, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakof. It all came to a head, of course, in the Revolution of 1917, fought in the streets of St. Petersburg.

When the loss of the Baltic states in World War I exposed St. Petersburg to easy attack from the west, Lenin moved the capital back to Moscow, and there began to transform western communism into a new form of slavophile autocracy. Resistance now came from St. Petersburg, beginning with the suppressed attempt of the sailors of Kronstadt naval base to establish their own socialist commune, and continuing more subtly in the poetry of Osip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova, and the music of Serge Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich.

So well did the city maintain its reputation as one of the most beautiful and productive cities of the western world that Hitler saw its complete destruction as essential to the turning of Russia into a subservient state. The heroic refusal of the city to surrender to the Nazis in the subsequent two-year siege, in spite of the death by starvation of a million inhabitants, re-established its status as Russia's pre-eminent city and inspired Stalin to execute thousands of its civic and military leaders after the war for aspiring to wrest the leadership of the country from Moscow.

Now that the Russian autocratic system of government has finally collapsed and Mafia gangs seem to be running the country, the debate between westerners and slavophiles has come front stage again in St. Petersburg. And now, for the first time, Canada is involved.

Mayor Sobchuk, a young English-speaking lawyer, encourages Western investment. At least four Canadian companies have so far responded--Algoma dresses, Montrealski Chleb bakeries, Macdonald's restaurant, and Bell communications. Metropolitan Ioann, head of the Russian Orthodox Church in St. Petersburg, has denounced the arrival of foreign enterprises as part of a combined CIA-Jewish-communist plot to destroy Mother Russia.

He feels equally threatened by the arrival of western evangelical churches. They are appealing to the spiritual needs of many who feel that the Orthodox Church collaborated too willingly with the

communist regime. One of the most successful of these new western churches is the Salvation Army. A St. Petersburg branch was opened two years ago by Capt. Jeff Ryan of Guelph, Ontario. He has a staff of 8 from Toronto, London (England) and Oslo.

The battle for the souls of St. Petersburg is being fought on the fields of hunger. While the arrival of free enterprise is bringing affluence to a some, many are not getting enough to eat. Metropolitan Ioann is allowing his churches to accept donations from the west. Some of it has come from the Russian Orthodox church of Montreal, thanks to the organizing efforts of a Westmount hair-stylist who immigrated from St. Petersburg ten years ago. Anna Saakian gets donations of clothes and medicine from her wealthy Jewish clients, and for two years has managed, with the help of Aeroflot and her church on boulevard Rene-Levesque, to get them delivered to her former parish priest in St. Petersburg, Father Nikolai.

A few months ago, Anna got a call from Mr. Eric Trigg, retired Senior Vice-President of the Aluminum Company of Canada. He had met the Deputy Foreign Minister of the Soviet Union at a Pacific Basin Economic conference in Vladivostok in 1989, and was now being asked by the Russian Embassy in Ottawa if he could help find donations of medical supplies desperately needed by the hospitals of St. Petersburg. He had managed to find what was needed through friends of his on the Boards of the Royal Victoria and the Montreal General hospitals, had got MOR Shipping Lines of St. Petersburg to

agree to take a container without charge from the Port of Montreal, and had arranged with the Canadian headquarters of the Salvation Army in Toronto for their Captain in St. Petersburg, Jeff Ryan, to receive and disburse the supplies when they arrived.

But Trigg hit a wall when he tried to contact Ryan in St. Petersburg, and he phoned Anna to ask if she could help. She was able to get some more supplies from the Jewish General to fill the container, but she wasn't able to get Nikolai and Ryan in touch with each other. The problem was not solved until Ryan came home to Guelph for a vacation last month, and I located him and got him to call Trigg. The shipment will now leave the port of Montreal in late August, and arrive in St. Petersburg two weeks later. If all goes well, other shipments will follow.

Here is a possible opening sequence for a film with a Canadian perspective about the terrible trauma that one of great cities of the world is going through for the fourth time in its existence--first during its birth in 1703-15, then in the revolution of 1917, then during the siege of 1941-43, and now under the rule of Mafia gangs today. We could follow Trigg and Saakian as they supervise the pick-up of medical equipment at the three Montreal hospitals, its loading onto the MOS ship and its departure from Montreal harbour. And we could follow Ryan--and Nikolai?--as they supervise its unloading and delivery in St. Petersburg. That would lead to an investigation of what it was that had once blocked communication between the two men, and whether they intend to work in cooperation

or competition.

There will be other leads to investigate in St. Petersburg. One of Anna Saakian's Montreal donators is Michael Rubbo, the film-maker, married to a Russian woman called Katerina Korolkevich. They met at the Moscow children's film festival 3 years ago. In one of the pockets of a pair of trousers that Michael donated to Anna, Katerina slipped a note inviting whoever received the trousers to write her. A few weeks later, she and Michael received a letter of thanks from a short-story writer in St. Petersburg, who included a picture of his artist wife and their five children. Subsequent correspondence revealed that this couple, Nikolai and Marina Egorov, agree with Metropolitan Ioann that the time has come for the return of the Romanov dynasty. Marina has sent Michael and Katerina photographs of icons she has painted of the last czar, Nicholas II, posing as a saint as he awaited his execution in 1918.

Eric Trigg has heard that there is a Grand Duchess of the Romanov family living in Toronto, and that she organizes shipments of aid directly to Metropolitan Ioann himself. Father Nikolai has not told Anna of this. Why not? Maybe he doesn't know himself. There are signs that the slavophile-western conflict has entered the Church itself, dividing the old clerics from the young, with the latter doing the most innovative work in Russia today in the teaching of science and the arts to children.

Professor Robert Jackson, of Yale University's Department of Russian Studies, is a friend of my in-laws in Boston, and has offered to write a letter of introduction for me to Konstantin Markovich Azadovsky, an eminent cultural critic in St. Petersburg. He could arrange interviews for me with Metropolitan Ioann and Mayor Sobchuk, show me the places where Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Mussorgsky, Lenin, Akhmatova, and Shoshtakovich left there marks, and introduce me to some of the young poets and musicians of today.

Both Anna Saakian and Eric Trigg have indicated an interest in accompanying me to St. Petersburg. I suspect Trigg would be willing to do so at his own expense. He will want to visit his friend Primakov, the former Deputy Foreign Minister, in Moscow. He thinks Primakov now heads up whatever government agency has replaced the KGB! It might be best to save Trigg for the major shoot, which should be done when Michael and Katerina are visiting their monarchist friends in St. Petersburg. That will follow a trip they will be making to Moscow to show their new baby to Katerina's parents, either during the long cold nights of the Russian Christmas, in early January, or during the magical "white nights" of the Russian spring solstice in June. The film may benefit from covering St. Petersburg and our main characters in the opposite extremes of both seasons.

The first research trip should be done with Anna in September. We should try to be there when the MOS ship arrives from Montreal. She thinks Father Nikolai would invite us to stay with him or with one of his parishioners. The Russian vice-consul in Montreal, Leonid Kadychev, has assured me that an invitation from Father Nikolai would get me a visa at the consulate within a week.

I should try to see other people in Canada before leaving. In Montreal: Bryant Bramson (Vice-President of Algoma dress-makers), Bryan Rawlings (Bell Canada officer responsible for overseas projects), and the bio-engineers at the three hospitals who are donating some of their supplies. In Toronto: the Romanov Grand Duchess, Ed Cohen (President of Macdonald's Canada), Andre Benoit (executive director of the Canada-Russia Business Council), and Bob Chapman (head of the Canadian Salvation Army). The most convenient time for me to go to Toronto would be the week of August 16.

Martin Duckworth

August 1, 1993

OTHER CONSULTANTS:

Marika Pruska-Carroll, Professor of Russian Studies at Concordia
Marina Sonkin, a Russian poet who teaches at Vanier CEGEP

READINGS:

Massey, "Peter the Great, a Biography"
Alexander Pushkin, "The Bronze Horseman", "Eugene Onegin"
Nicolas Gogol, "The Overcoat", "Dead Souls"
Ivan Turgenev, "Fathers and Children"
Fedor Dostoyevsky, "The Possessed",
Isaiah Berlin, "Russian Thinkers"
Andrei Biely, "Petersburg"
Alan Moorehead, "The Russian Revolution"
Anna Akhmatova, "The Complete Poems"
Osip Mandelstam, "The Noise of Time"
Nadezhda Mandelstam, "Hope Against Hope"
William Shirer, "The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich"
Harrison Salisbury, "900 Days, the Siege of Leningrad"

LISTENINGS:

Glinka, "A Life for the Czar",
Mussorgsky, "Boris Godunov"
Rimsky-Korsakov, "Ivan the Terrible"
Serge Prokofiev, "War and Peace"
Dmitri Shostakovich, "October Symphony"

Back in the kitchen in Outremont, the discussion is about the invasion of American culture. Katie: "If we become too dependent on the rest of the world, our culture will diminish." Michael: "Quebec has managed to keep out of too much American influence. Japan loves American pop culture, yet they stay essentially Japanese underneath." Marina: "I'm scared to go back. The feeling of what I've lost would be stronger there. Somebody told me that if I stay away for 10 years, Russian culture will be dead inside me. I'm getting spoiled here." Katie: "I find I'm becoming more Russian here. I'm trying to observe little religious traditions, for the first time." Marina: "The motherland is a metaphysical place. You have to sever connection with it. It's still too fresh a wound for me to write about. I don't know if it will ever heal." Katie: "We were more western oriented than others, my mother and me. Her mother had a romance with an American communist. They wrote letters for years. I remember she wrapped them in blue ribbon. So I had a dream of America. And when I saw it here, I wished I could help make life better for our people at home. They deserve a better life. They worked hard, they helped other countries when they were better off."

The conversation drifts off over an image of the sleeping infant in the corner. We hear Marina saying: "I used to think that all human beings were similar. I don't think so any more. Similarities are on the surface only." Cut to Michael: "So you think Katie and I won't make it?" Marina: "They say you won't know until you've been together for seven years." Michael: "If you make a child, it's a

mixture. You have to look after the mixture." Katie: "I'd like to show Moscow to Michael. He only saw Red Square and Arbat Street when we met there. He didn't really see Russia."

Three of the above sequences have already been shot: Michael and Katerina on Arbeit Street in 1989, their wedding in Montreal in 1992, and their kitchen discussion with Marina Sonkin in 1993.

The body of the film would be about Michael and Katerina's visit to Russia next spring. They will be staying with Fred and Gretta in Moscow, and with Nikolai and Marina in St. Petersburg. The Sun Youth store front should be in operation in St. Petersburg by then.

To script the body of the film, I now need a research trip to those two cities. The most productive time to go would be with the Sun Youth inspection team which expects to go in September. They will be accompanied by Anna Saakian, who will introduce them to officials of the City of St. Petersburg and of the Russian Orthodox Church. With my Hi-8 camera, I should be able to extract some rich material out of these meetings, as well as out of their checking of possible store-fronts, potential donators and mafia protectors. I should also be able to get useful material establishing Fred and Gretta, Nikolai and Marina as they await the arrival of Michael and Katie.